

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-15 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 CIAE-00
INR-07 NSAE-00 EUR-12 BIB-01 H-01 CU-04 /058 W
-----058137 191525Z /44

R 191255Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6530
USIA
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0408

USIA FOR INA AND IBS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PROP SOPN PINS SY
SUBJ: SYRIAN AND US INFORMATION POLICY

SUMMARY: ON JANUARY 15, INFORMATION MINISTER AHMAD
ISKANDAR AHMAD LECTURED THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF YOUNG
POLITICAL LEADERS (ACYPL) FOR TWO HOURS ON SYRIA'S INFORMATION POLICY
AND SYRIA'S PERCEPTION OF THE US. HIS VIEWS OF THE US
WERE DISCOURAGINGLY DISTORTED AS HE TENDED TO BELIEVE
THAT THE USG EXERTS SOME OF THE SAME CONTROL OVER ITS MEDIA
AS DOES SYRIA. ON THE OTHER HAND, HE CRITICIZED SYRIA'S
FORMER ISOLATION AND CALLED FOR INCREASING CONTACT AND
DIALOGUE. HE WAS INTRIGUED BY THE COMMENTS OF ACYPL
MEMBERS ON THE US CONGRESS AND ITS DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AS
WELL AS BY THEIR COMMENTS ON THE VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE.
I BELIEVE WE MUST WORK TO DININISH THE FUNDAMENTAL IGNORANCE AND
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DISTORTION REFLECTED IN AHMAD'S VIEWS IF WE ARE TO HAVE
ANY HOPE OF ULTIMATELY INFLUENCING SYRIAN FOREIGN
POLICY. WE ARE CONSIDERING A COORDINATED
EMBASSY PROGRAM TO WORK TOWARD THIS GOAL. END SUMMARY.

1. ON JANUARY 15, INFORMATION MINISTER AHMAD ISKANDAR
AHMAD GAVE THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF YOUNG POLITICAL

LEADERS (ACYPL) A SHORT BUT CHILLING COURSE ON SYRIAN INFORMATION POLICY AND SYRIA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD US INFORMATION. HE JUSTIFIED INFORMATION CONTROL BY HIS OWN EXPERIENCE AS A REPORTER WITH THE IRRESPONSIBLE PRIVATE PRESS PRIOR TO THE 1963 BAATHI REVOLUTION (THE RECORD WAS PRETTY DISMAL) AND SAID WITH OBVIOUS SINCERITY: "I WILL DO MY BEST TO SEE THAT THE PRIVATE PRESS, AS IT EXISTED BEFORE THE REVOLUTION, NEVER RETURNS."

2. AHMAD RECOGNIZED LITTLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SYRIA'S CONTROLLED INFORMATION POLICY AND US PERFORMANCE IN THIS REGARD. "WE LISTEN TO THE VOA TO FIND OUT WHAT US POLICY IS, JUST AS WE LISTEN TO RADIO MOSCOW TO HEAR THE SOVIET POLICY LINE. THE VOA HAS BROADCAST ALL INDICATIONS OF SUPPORT FOR SADAT'S POLICY, BUT HAS IGNORED ANY CRITICISM OF HIS INITIATIVE." THIS IS THE SAME POLICY FOLLOWED BY THE THREE MAJOR US NETWORKS, HE ADDED, SINCE NEITHER PRESS, TELEVISION NOR RADIO IN THE US HAS CARRIED REPORTS OF THE MASS DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST SADAT WHICH HAVE BEEN HELD IN SYRIA. AHMAD SAID THAT, INSTEAD, THE NETWORKS CARRIED SADAT'S CLAIM THAT 98 PERCENT OF THE SYRIAN PEOPLE AND ARMY SUPPORT EGYPT'S POLICY. HE RECALLED THAT BEFORE SADAT'S VISIT TO JERUSALEM THE US MEDIA CRITICIZED BEGIN'S TERRORIST BACKGROUND BUT SINCE THE VISIT IT HAS CEASED THIS CRITICISM.
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3. AHMAD THEN CITED A RECENT INCIDENT WHEN THE VOA "LIED." AFP HAD REPORTED THAT THE US SIXTH FLEET WAS HEADING TOWARD ALEXANDRIA AT THE TIME SADAT MADE HIS JERUSALEM VISIT. AHMAD SAID THAT THE VOA DENIED THIS REPORT, INCIDENTALLY OMITTING THE AFP SOURCE AND ATTRIBUTING IT SOLELY TO DAMASCUS RADIO. TWO DAYS LATER, HOWEVER, THE DAMASCUS AP STRINGER (LOUIS FARES) TOLD AHMAD THAT A NAVY SPOKESMAN IN NAPLES HAD CONFIRMED AFP'S REPORT. I FLATLY DENIED THE TRUTH OF THIS ALLEGATION.

4. AHMAD SAID THAT SYRIA CAREFULLY READ THE ARTICLES BY CERTAIN US COLUMNISTS TO FIND OUT THE POLICY AND THINKING OF THE US ADMINISTRATION. HE OBVIOUSLY THOUGHT THAT THOSE (UNSPECIFIED) US COLUMNISTS ARE FED THE LINE THEY SHOULD TAKE BY THE ADMINISTRATION. (THIS IS STANDARD SYRIAN PRACTICE) WE HAVE NOTED IN THE PAST THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD USED BAATH COLUMNIST KHOULI TO GET HIS POINTS ACROSS. IN ADDITION, WE HAVE NOTICED THAT ALL CONVERSATION WE HAVE WITH TOP SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AND PARTY OFFICIALS ARE RECORDED VERBATIM AND THAT FREQUENTLY THE SAME LINE AND IDENTICAL PHRASEOLOGY SHOWS UP A DAY OR TWO LATER IN ONE OF THE NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS OR

COLUMNS.)

5. ANSWERING AN ACYPL QUESTION, AHMAD SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT SYRIA'S RADIO BROADCASTS IN HEBREW DIRECTED TOWARD INRAEL. AHMAD DEFENDED THE STRIDENT AND HOSTILE TONE OF THESE BROADCASTS SAYING THAT SYRIA SAYS THE SAME THING TO THE ISRAELIS AS IT SAYS TO ITS OWN PEOPLE. (THIS IS IN PART TRUE. POLOFF HAS COMPARED HEBREW AND ARABIC NEWS TRANSMISSIONS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS AND FOUND THEN TO BE ALMOST IDENTICAL. THIS IS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE WITH COMMENTARIES, HOWEVER.) AHMAD SAID THAT HE USES AS SOURCE MATERIAL ISRAELI NEWSPAPERS AND RADIO, REPORTS OF FRIENDLY JEWS IN ISRAEL WHO CONSPIRE TO COOPERATE WITH SYRIA (HE CITED THE CASE OF THE JEWISH LEFTIST WHO WAS ARRESTED IN EARLY

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1970S FOR EXPIONAGE ON BEHALF OF SYRI), STATEMENTS BY LEADING JEWISH AUTHORS AND PERSONALITIES BOTH SIONIST AND ANTI-ZIONIST THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, AS WELL AS STATEMENTS BY WORLD FIGURES LIKE GENERAL BROWN AND NIXON DURING THE FROST INTERVIEW. THE BASIC MESSAGE CONVEYED, ACCORDING TO AHMAD, IS THAT SYRIA WANTS PEACE BUT WILL NEVER SURRENDER AND THAT ISRAEL CANNOT COMBINE PEACE WITH ANNEXATION OF ARAB LANDS. AHMAD SAID THAT SARG HEBREW BROADCASTS COMPARE THE LIFE OF ARAB JEWS INSIDE ISRAEL AND THEIR FORMER LIVES IN ARAB COUNTRIES AND HIGHLIGHT PREJUDICE AGAINST ORIENTAL JEWS AND ARABS IN ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. AHMAD CONCLUDED. "IF THIS SEEMS HOSTILE, WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT ISRAELI BROADCASTS BEAMED TO THE ARABS?"

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-15 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 CIAE-00
INR-07 NSAE-00 BIB-01 H-01 CU-04 EUR-12 /058 W
-----058724 191524Z /43

R 191255Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6531

USIA
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0408

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6. CENSORSHIP IN SYRIA IS THE OVERALL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MINISTER OF INFORMATION, AHMAD SAID, AND IT IS NOT WELCOMED BY OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND PUBLISHERS. HE POINTED OUT THAT RADIO, TELEVISION AND THE SANA NEWS AGENCY ARE DIRECTLY CONTROLLED BY THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND THEIR OUTPUT REPRESENTS THE VOICE OF THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT. HE CLAIMED THAT NEWSPAPERS ARE AUTONOMOUS AND NOT SUBJECTED TO DAILY CENSORSHIP, BUT BECAUSE THEY ARE DIRECTED BY BAATH PARTY OFFICIALS, WHO HAVE CENSORSHIP RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR PUBLICATIONS, THEIR OUTPUT CONFORMS BAATH PARTY IDEOLOGY. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE TIMES, AHMAD SAID, WHEN A NEWSPAPER WILL PUBLISH A COLUMN HE COULD NOT AGREE WITH. (WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT AT TIMES COLUMNISTS HAVE BEEN CRITICIZED, SUSPENDED OR EVEN FIRED FOR SUCH NONCONFORMIST ARTICLES.)

7. CENSORSHIP IS LARGELY CONFINED TO FOREIGN POLICY, AHMAD CLAIMED.
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MILITARY AND INTERNAL POLITICAL NEWS IS ALSO CENSORED BUT NEWSPAPERS DO CARRY MANY ARTICLES CRITICAL OF INTERNAL POLICY AND FAILURES.) CRITICISM IS NOT PERMITTED ON RADIO OR TV, AHMAD SAID. NEVERTHELESS, AHMAD CLAIMED, THERE ARE LIMITS ON THE CAPABILITY OF CENSORSHIP TO CONTROL SYRIAN THINKING: "OUR PEOPLE ARE SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF BUT SOMETIMES THEY ARE TROUBLESOME. THIS IS TRADITIONAL. THEY WILL NOT JUMP THROUGH HOOPS OR ACCEPT EVERYTHING TOLD THEM."

8. FOREIGN FILMS ARE CARRIED ON TV WHICH IS LARGELY DEVOTED TO ENTERTAINMENT RATHER THAN PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTS, ACCORDING TO AHMAD. ALL FOREIGN PUBLICATIONS ARE, HE CLAIMED IN PRINCIPLE, ALLOWED TO ENTER SYRIA SUBJECT TO CENSORSHIP. (TIME AND NEWSWEEK AS WELL AS MANY FOREIGN NEWSPAPERS ARE READILY AVAILABLE ON NEWSTANDS AND ARE SELDOM CENSORED. THIS IS A MAJOR CHANGE FROM A YEAR AND A HALF AGO WHEN US PUBLICATIONS WERE SELDOM AVAILABLE AND THEN USUALLY CENSORED.)

9. AHMAD SAID THAT FOREIGN JOURNALISTS MUST HAVE AN ENTRY VISA WHICH

CAN BE OBTAINED AT THE BORDER AFTER TELEPHONIC CLEARANCE OF MININFO. AHMAD ADDED THAT 150 FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS ARE ACCREDITED ALTHOUGH NOT ALL ARE RESIDENT IN DAMASCUS AND ABOUT ONE THOUSAND JOURNALISTS VISIT SYRIA EACH YEAR. AHMAD SAID THAT THERE WAS A BLACKLIST OF JOURNALISTS PRIOR TO 1975 BUT THIS POLICY HAS BEEN ABANDONED (CORRESPONDENTS FORMERLY ON THE SYRIAN BLACKLIST HAVE, SINCE 1975, BEEN ALLOWED TO ENTER SYRIA, HOWEVER SOME INDIVIDUALS ARE STILL DENIED ENTRY). AHMAD SAID THAT LONG PERIOD OF SYRIAN ISOLATION HAD DAMAGED SYRIAN IMAGE IN THE WORLD WHICH LED TO A POLICY CHANGE TO RECEIVE AS MANY AMERICANS AS POSSIBLE AND TO EXPLAIN SYRIA'S JUST CAUSE DIRECTLY RATHER THAN HAVE SYRIA'S IMAGE PROJECTED BY ZIONIST PROPAGANDA.
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10. AHMAD ASKED THE ACYPL DELEGATION ABOUT THE VISION AND THE APPROACH OF YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES. HE ASKED ABOUT DECISION-MAKING IN CONGRESS: THE ROLE OF STAFF AND THE RESPONSIVENESS OF CONGRESSMEN TO THE VIEWS OF THEIR CONSTITUENCIES. DELEGATES ANSWERED QUESTIONS ON THE US AND POINTED OUT THAT FLOW OF INFORMATION ON ISRAEL-ARAB PROBLEM TO THEIR OFFICES WAS UNBALANCED AND NOT IN THE ARAB'S FAVOR, ALTHOUGH, AS ONE POINTED OUT, CURRENT MEDIA TREATMENT APPEARED MUCH MORE EVENHNADED COMPARED WITH THAT OF A FEW YEARS AGO. AHMAD CONCLUDED SINCERELY THAT THEIR COMMENTS HAD GIVEN HIM MUCH TO THINK ABOUT.

11. COMMENT: I HAVE REPORTED THIS CONVERSATION AT LENGTH BECAUSE IT DEMONSTRATES SOME OF THE CRITICAL PROBLEMS WE FACE WHERE HILD IT ALSO SUGGESTS WAYS WE CAN OVERCOME THEM. I AM CONVINCED AHMAD WAS ABSOLUTELY SINCERE IN WHAT HE SAID. HIS DISTORTED VIEW OF THE UNITED STATES, WHICH I BELIEVE IS SHARED BY MOST SYRIAN DECISION-MAKERS, INFECTS THE SYRIAN VIEWS OF OUR MOTIVES IN OUR FOREIGN POLICY. VISITS SUCH AS THAT BY THE ACYPL AND THE NEWS AND INFORMATION PEOPLE WE ARE CURRENTLY SENDING TO THE US ARE ESSENTIAL TO BREAK DOWN THE MUTUAL DISTORTION THAT EXISTS. ON THE OTHER HAND, VISITS BY US EXPERTS ON FOREIGN POLICY SEEM TO HAVE LIMITED IMPACT AS SYRIANS CLOSE THEIR EARS TO WHAT THEY FEEL IS USG PROSELYTIZING. WE WILL NOT ACHIEVE MAJOR ADVANCES OVERNIGHT IN THIS REGARD. NEVERTHELESS, THE SYRIANS HAVE OPENDE THE DOOR AND I BELIEVE WE MUST TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THIS OPENINGQ IN PREPARING PHASE TWO OF OUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES STUDY WE WILL TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE PROBLEMS WHICH ARE OBVIOUS FROM AHMAD'S PRESENTATION AND WHAT MEANS WE HAVE

FOR DEALING WITH THEM. THIS WILL ALSO ALLOW
USIS TO ADJUST ITS CURRENT COUNTRY PLAN ACCORDINGLY.
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WE CLEARLY MUST DEVELOP A MORE COORDINATED AND
FOCUSSED POLICY FOR USING USG RESOURCES IN THIS REGARD
AND THE GOALS/OBJECTIVES EXERCISED IS TIMELY.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLICIES, INFORMATION MEDIA, INFORMATION CONTROL
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 19 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC00408
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780028-1113
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Retention: 0
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Review Release Date: n/a
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Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3749597
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SYRIAN AND US INFORMATION POLICY SUMMARY: ON JANUARY 15, INFORMATION MINISTER AHMAD ISKANDAR AHMAD LECTURED THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF YO
TAGS: PROP, SOPN, PINS, SY
To: STATE USIA
Type: TE
vdkgvkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/62ed3be2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014